

RECREATION

Project title: The Evolving Social Construction of Wolves:
Exploring Yellowstone National Park Visitors' Social Interactions with *Canis lupus*

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Objective: This study explores the visitor's perceptions of wolves, how these perceptions are shaped, the nature of the wolf watching experience and how these issues influence social conflict over wolf reintroduction and management. Using a social constructivist approach, this study is analyzing the in-depth interviews to explore 1) the public's social constructions of wolves in various contexts; 2) the nature of the recreational experiences individuals seek with respect to wolves; 3) how current social conflicts are affecting public perceptions; and 4) how new opportunities to interact with reintroduced wolf populations affect people's perceptions of wolves in the future. The goal of the study is to identify and describe the range of experiences and meanings associated with wolf watching.

Findings: From July 1999 through September 1999 21 in-depth interviews were completed. These interviews ranged from 10 minutes to 1 1/2 hours long, with the average interview lasting between 30-40 minutes. Another 10 interviews are expected to be completed between January and March of the year 2000. The interviews occur in the Lamar Valley, an area where wolf sightings are prevalent. Although analysis is ongoing, the nature of the insights that are being revealed include the dynamics of the wolf watching experience, the broader meanings of the Yellowstone wolves and how this experience is incorporated into the participant's life and into the total Yellowstone National Park experience.